



China Perspectives

2011/2 | 2011

The Changing World of Chinese Labour

Éditorial

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5534>

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 July 2011

Number of pages: 2

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Jean-François Huchet, « Éditorial », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2011/2 | 2011, Online since 30 June 2011, connection on 28 October 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5534>

Editorial

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HUCHET

The wave of strikes that hit Taiwanese and Japanese companies in Guangdong Province in June 2010 demonstrated to the world that Chinese workers are no longer the docile labour force of “the world’s workshop.” Braving the hostility of corporate management and the official Chinese trade union, they showed that they are now capable of organising themselves to demand salary increases and better working conditions. The fact that the strikes produced concrete results for the workers without massive repression on the part of the government has raised many fundamental questions concerning the way in which the realm of salaried employment is evolving in China. Certain questions, such as the rapid fall in the population aged 16 to 30 and its impact on the labour market, have already been the subject of analysis by demographers for several years. Others, such as the possible organisation of a workers’ movement at the national level and the potential implications of this for the political regime, have suddenly taken a new turn after thirty years of domination of capital over labour. As is sometimes the case, it is through news items that radical developments in society come to light.

These events were the starting point of the present special feature. We have tried to analyse the influence of the June 2010 strikes and to discover whether they really reflect a major change in the relationships between Chinese employees and capital holders on the one hand, and the state on the other (even though the two overlap fairly often in China on account of the importance of public companies in the economy). As always, *China Perspectives* has called upon specialists from a variety of different disciplines to respond to this crucial yet complex question.

The answers put forward by the authors are ultimately fairly cautious, and some even contradict the idea of a significant radical development in the relationships between the salaried workforce and management on the one hand, and the state on the other.

A notable exception, however, and not the least important, is demography. Michel Cartier, in his analysis of the evolution of the working population over the last thirty years, reveals the major, irreversible changes that demography is bringing about in the labour market, in particular with regard to the rural labour force aged under thirty on which a portion of the Chinese economic miracle rests. Although it is difficult to match up the different series of available statistics on the working population, China is about to pass the “Lewisian Turning Point” (named for the English development economist Arthur Lewis, who conceptualised this phenomenon) beyond which cheap labour is no longer available in sufficient quantity to meet the demands of production. No dramatic demographic development (massive immigration or increase in the birth rate) seems likely to reverse this silent evolution, which will necessarily have a profound impact on the labour market in the medium and long-term. To varying degrees and at different periods of time, all industrialised nations have experienced this process of demographic transition. The repercussions on the balance of power between capital and labour have always been considerable in the long-term, whether in post-war Japan and South Korea, England in the mid-nineteenth century, or the United States at the end of the nineteenth century.

Nonetheless, this impact can take a certain time to make itself felt, and may be weaker or stronger depending on the political regime in question. Indeed, the great majority of authors in this feature emphasise that many obstacles remain to real change in this area. Although Jean-Philippe Béja underlines the importance of the June 2010 strikes on a political level, he indicates that they represent a tentative advance that will certainly go down in the history of the workers’ movement in China, but which is far from heralding the arrival of a real capacity on the part of the salaried workforce to organise itself at national level for the defence and progress of economic and social rights. The same is true of Pun Ngai’s analysis. Her study of the production relationship between big companies and migrant workers in the construction industry demonstrates the extent to which the situation of the latter remains precarious despite advances in labour laws. The segmentation of production operations and the externalisation to subcontractors of construction phases perpetuates the precarious situation of migrant workers, who have to wait until the work is finished to be (badly) paid. This type of production relationship also means that migrants have no direct relationship with the big contractors who initiate property projects and who in any case do not feel responsible for the rights of migrant workers. The same analysis can be applied to other industrial and service sectors in China where subcontracting is the dominant mode of production.

On another level, Chloé Froissart’s analysis on the work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) runs along the same lines. Although progress is noted in the work of Chinese NGOs with regard to information and the defence of employees’ rights, the author also shows how the state manipulates them in order to limit the emergence of a real civil society and of an autonomous workers’ rights defence movement. Similarly, William Hurst, in his analysis of developments in social security for employees, shows that despite unquestionable progress, the communist regime has preferred to maintain a highly decentralised form of governance that limits progress in employees’ rights. In its construction of a social protection system, the Communist Party has sought to maintain social and political stability by advancing without democratic principles, reacting on an *ad hoc* basis to the needs of workers hit by the restructuring of the country’s industrial fabric.

In conclusion, this special feature takes a rather measured and prudent view of the influence of the June 2010 strikes. Without revealing more of its contents, the CEFC team hope you enjoy reading this new issue of *China Perspectives*.

■ Translated by Elizabeth Guill